

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **LIFELONG LEARNING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

DATE: **THURSDAY, 4TH DECEMBER 2014**

REPORT BY: **CHIEF OFFICER (EDUCATION AND YOUTH)**

SUBJECT: **SCHOOL TRANSPORT UPDATE**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.01 To update members on progress made on the implementation of the revised school transport policy.

2.00 BACKGROUND

- 2.01 In May 2013, Cabinet agreed to change the discretionary denominational school transport policy. With effect from September 2014, free transport is being provided for pupils to the nearest voluntary aided school where admission to that school is on denominational grounds, subject to the distance criteria (2 miles for primary, 3 miles for secondary). Suitable evidence of adherence to the faith of the school such as a baptismal certificate or a letter from a priest may be requested to support an application. Free transport is being maintained for pupils who were eligible under the previous policy.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.01 The change in the school transport policy affected new pupils starting at St Richard Gwyn Catholic High School in September 2014. Prior to the start of the new academic year, parents were encouraged to apply for school transport in order that bus passes could be issued in good time for eligible pupils under the revised policy. Information was also made available regarding the purchase of spare seats on school contracts, i.e. any spare seats that may still be available after all eligible pupils had been issued bus passes could be sold at a termly price of £55, subject to compliance with the Transport Acts 1985/2000 (that there is no suitable public service bus running along the route at a convenient time for the start and end of the school day).
- 3.02 During September 2014, local authority officers worked closely with the school to ensure that every eligible pupil had applied for a pass. For example, notices were displayed on school buses during the first week of term reminding pupils that they should produce their pass to show the driver when boarding the bus. Drivers were advised that

pupils must not be refused access to the bus under any circumstances, regardless of whether they could show a pass or not. A letter from St Richard Gwyn was also sent home with pupils reiterating the need to apply for transport.

3.03 A “period of grace” was allowed for the first month to allow students extra time to apply for transport in order to obtain their passes. This was extended to October half term, as some students reported delays in receiving their passes. The School assisted throughout this period by handing out passes to pupils individually. From the local authority’s point of view, our duty of care has been to give every reasonable opportunity for parents and carers to apply for transport if they believe that they are entitled and to subsequently clearly communicate their responsibilities to them if they are not abiding by the policy. The collaboration between St Richard Gwyn and the local authority has led to a successful implementation of the policy.

3.04 In the future, it is the wish of the school to provide a service for all pupils regardless of faith and within the framework of the amended school transport policy. Meetings have already been held with the Headteacher and staff to discuss this proposal and further meetings will be arranged to develop this in more detail. A legal view is being sought as to whether the school can legally offer competing services with commercial bus operators.

3.05 **Comments by Headteacher, St Richard Gwyn**

We have co-operated as a school with the Council policy as changed from September 2014. As stated in our comments during the consultation period and noted in 7.00 (below) we did not believe this policy would result in anything but a small saving. I would think the increased administration costs thus far have increased costs. Compliance with the Transport Acts 3.01 (above) has hit our new intake harder than we had anticipated, and is the main sticking point on a user comprehension basis – empty spaces which have not yet been, and might not be, consolidated into different routes for which they would be prepared to pay the termly fee. It is for this reason alone, at this stage, we see the only way forward as offering to take the tendering in-house so we can legally sell these spaces. We have ascertained only one route actually could bring children past the school (this route does not affect anybody). The period of grace has been helpful to families.

The consequence of the planning, consultation period and passing of the new policy on concessionary funding for non-Catholics saw a reduction in roll against the school number of 173 in each year group as follows: 2013 -30; 2014 -63; total loss of 93 pupils on roll which impacts massively on finance, curriculum planning and on teaching jobs.

Current early indications based on the school trying to reassure

parents we will look into making transport possible for those who wish to pay are more positive. I did express clearly in my response to the consultation the concern I had, which has borne fruit, that the change to the policy would destabilise our otherwise strong admission. The continuing concern I have, which echoes Catholic social teaching, is the school will only be a destination for those who can afford to choose, unless they are Catholics. Saint Richard Gwyn has not and will not destabilise other local school provision.

4.00 RECOMMENDATION

- 4.01 That the progress made in implementing the revised school transport policy be noted.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.01 Savings are made through rationalisation of transport routes and/ or size of busses or coaches. Until the outcome of a forthcoming tender round is known in February 2015, it is not possible to fully determine the savings that will be achieved as a direct consequence of reducing entitlement to free school transport to denominational schools.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

- 6.01 To help with education costs, the Education Maintenance Allowance is available to support families on low income.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- 7.01 The revised policy is likely to result in a small reduction in school contract vehicles.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 8.01 An Equalities Impact Assessment was carried out prior to the revised policy being adopted.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.01 None.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

- 10.01 None as a direct consequence of this report.

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

- 11.01 None.

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 None.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985 BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None.

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